

Nationalism: Gandhi and Women in Rural Punjab

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The role of the rural women in national movement as a subject for research is of current origin not only in India but world. It is noteworthy there are a few studies on women's role in the nationalist movement or the social or political injunctions to their meaningful ingress into the public sphere. Important works on the national movement mostly fail to examine the entry and their contribution of rural masses in general and women in particular, in the freedom struggle¹. Most of the accounts of women's role in the national movement are descriptive not critical or analytical. They do not examine either the reasons or the implications of this spontaneous upsurge of political activity by women of all rural areas. The history of common rural Indian women's participation and their response to Gandhian means of movement has not been recorded or documented at all and so is in the case of Punjabi women. There is no doubt that with publication of pamphlets, public meetings women from elite class got voice but the question is how a major flux of women responded and contributed to nationalism channelized by Gandhiji. Hence it becomes pertinent to study the role of marginalized women i.e. the rural Punjabi women's response to Gandhian mass movement on the basis of available sources i.e. folklore. One segment of the folklore in Punjab is Bolliyan² which have been created and sung by the rural Punjabi women.

This article reviews and analyses the role of Gandhi in drawing a large number of rural women into the mainstream of the freedom movement. Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in public life was a departure from those of the 19th century Indian social reformers. He saw that not only elite women but also the rural women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order.

¹ Examples Asthana, Pratima, *Women's Movement in India* (Delhi, 1974), Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement 1857-1947*, Delhi, 1968.

² These are the songs for birth and marriage, love, war, and glorifying legendary heroes of the past. Bolliyan are of three types- Nikki Boli (small), Lammi Boli (long Boli) and Do Tuki Boli (two lined boli)

The second decade of the 20th century witnessed an immediate change as women in Punjab were becoming active in the politics. Entry of Gandhi gave a fillip to this involvement but the Rowlatt Act³ and the Amritsar massacre set the stage for the active participation of women. This is the time when Gandhi began to develop a program for mass movement including women in the main stream. When Gandhi broadcasted a speech from Delhi on April 6th, 1919⁴ he addressed a meeting of ladies of communities and asked them to join *satyagraha* (peaceful resistance) movement to facilitate the total satyagraha.⁵ Within a week, hundreds of peaceful protesters were massacred in a four walled garden in the city of Amritsar. Men, women and children were killed. In Boliyan the women started denouncing obnoxious colonial rule and their anger drained in these lines-

Sir te tokra narangiya da
*Kithe lahein ge raj firangiya da*⁶

The real and good happened when he insisted that a woman's real sphere of activity was the home. So he became instrumental in creating conditions which could help women break the shackles of domesticity. He more or less completely bypassed the dominant nationalist vocabulary and showed that it was possible to articulate and defend the case for independence in a very different language. He showed that not every movement for independence is national, not every national struggle is nationalist and that not every nationalist movement need articulate itself in the language of European rather than home-grown theories of nationalism⁷. Speeches of Gandhi during his visits in Punjab left tremendous impact on the women in Punjab. They started eulogizing him in *trinjana*⁸ and *giddha*⁹ -

Geet giddhe wich gayiye
*Bapu Gandhi de*¹⁰

Looking the all-round scenario it is quite evident that mobility of the rural women was not simple as it sounds. He noticed the lack of a public presence of women as a real problem because in Punjab women were only fit for

³ Rowlett Act prohibited public protest as well as suspended civil liberties.

⁴ M.K Gandhi, "Speech at Ladies Protest Meeting", "Collected Works of Mahatama Gandhi", Delhi, vol.15, p.89

⁵ Nonviolence is both an end and a means. But, to appreciate the full significant of treating nonviolence in this way, it is necessary to look more closely at his philosophy of action. This philosophy is composed of the three main elements: Truth, Nonviolence, and Self-suffering

⁶ Mohinder Singh Randhawa & Davinder Singh Satyarth(ed.), *Punjabi Lokgeet*, Delhi, 2000, p. 483.

⁷ Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy*, Macmillan, 1991, p.6.

⁸ The word *Trinjan* has been originated in medieval Punjab which describes the place in a village where women would meet up to spin cotton on *charkha*

⁹ Girls folk dance in Punjab

¹⁰ let us sing songs in glory of father Gandhi in the Punjabi girl's dance.

household jobs. Their place was kitchen and at the best they might decorate their *bathakas*¹¹. The proverbs were quite popular among Punjabi folk :

Ander bethi lakh di

*Bahr gayee kakh di*¹²

To encourage and change this mindset was unwieldy a challenge for Gandhi so he devised and advocated ways that took into account the social realities and on the face of it his proposals and exhortations did not upset the social structure too much as to be totally unacceptable. Female infanticide, compulsory widowhood, polygamy, prejudices against women education etc. were the boulders in their way. This conditioned environment deprived women of any significance in the life outside the home. Within the four walled home she was entirely dependent on her father, husband, or son, as in the patriarchal setup Punjabi man always superior to women. These surroundings left them with no identity or individuality of their own. Accepting the challenge Gandhi pursued a practical approach and preached female virtues of bravery and independence, and a capacity to bear suffering; the model he offered to Indian women was the virtuous and faithful wife¹³. Thus satisfying the Punjabi masculinity Gandhi won half of his battle to engender mass movement.

The effect was visible in Lahore on 22nd January when Kasturba Gandhi presided over meeting where the President of Reception Committee was Lala Laj Pat Rai's wife Radha Devi.¹⁴ During these tours women were asked to boycott foreign goods and appealed to take the spinning and wearing khadi. Sarla Devi Chaudrani in July 1920 launched the programme and addressed public meetings at Lahore, Sialkot and Jehlum, She emphasized upon the use of Swadeshi, which was considered panacea for the poverty of India¹⁵. Denouncing modern course of development as contemporary intelligentsia was demanding but Gandhi focused on the way of life of the Indian village and its thousands of year's old substantially self-contained and self-sufficient system to argue for a different kind of national life where that way of life would be valued and protected. He also argued the basic purpose of life in the Indian national understanding was spiritual growth (or attaining moksha) and one of the best facilitators of this moral cultivation was the simple and sustainable way of life of the Indian village. Gandhi asked the women to

¹¹ Punjabi Drawing Room

¹² Sitting inside the home is of worth millions going out worthless.

¹³ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi*, p. 209-10.

¹⁴ RajKumar, Rameshwari Devi, Romila Pruthi(ed.) *Women's Movement and Freedom Struggle*, Delhi, 1998, P.119

¹⁵ *The Young India*, July 7, 1920 and *The Tribune*, June 17, 1921.

spin cotton on charkha Punjabi women loved Charkha as it was their companion in the thick and thin times. The women in villages sent their message and showed their cohesion through *gidha*.¹⁶

Bari barsi khattan gaya si

Khatt ke lianda allo

Bapu Gandhi ne charkha kita chalu¹⁷

Sshilla Nayar recalls a meeting held at Rohtak where the hall was filled to the capacity with women in lehgas and rustic clothes.¹⁸ Gandhi gave new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement and drew into it the women in large number. During this movement pledges were taken from cloth dealers to sell swadeshi.¹⁹ Thousands of women dressed in khadar marched through the streets of Multan selling Khadar. Prior to this movement Latha²⁰ was used in abundance. The Lahore Municipality passed a resolution urging employees to wear Khadi uniforms.²¹ The Pagris (turbans) and Duppattas (a cloth used by Indian women) of Latha were replaced by Khadi. The changed scenario echoed in a Boli of contemporary period:

Gandhi de Khadhar ne

Sangh Lathe da ghuttia²²

The government took stern actions against *Satyagrahis*²³. They were lathi charged and the movement was declared unlawful. Chauri-chaura²⁴ incidence compelled Gandhi to call back the movement. Gandhi was arrested and sentenced to six year imprisonment. Bewildered women's antipathy and annoyance towards Gandhi worn out like this in this Boli:

Aap Gandhi kaid ho gaya

Sanu de gaya khaddar da bana²⁵

The charm of Gandhi never faded after Non Co-Operation Movement. Manmohini Sehgal recalls it was a sort of training programme for future Satyagraha Programme of 1930-34 and 1940-42. Without doubt women in rural

¹⁶ Punjabi women's folk dance in which Bolliyan are sung.

¹⁷ The meaning of the boli is – after years together I been to earn something, I earned Potato, Bapu Gandhi brought on tracc spinning wheel.

¹⁸ RajKumar, Rameshwari Devi, Romila Pruthi(ed.), op.cit, p.117.

¹⁹ *The Tribune*, Sept. 15, 1921

²⁰ *cotton fabric cloth*

²¹ *The Tribune*, December 14, 1921.

²² Meaning of the Boli is Gandhi's Khadhar has strangled the neck of Latha. Mohinder Singh Randhawa, & Davinder Singh(ed.), *Punjabi Lokgeet*, 1960, reprinted in 2000, Delhi, p. 483.

²³ The persons who joined Gandhi's movement are known as Satyagrahi.

²⁴ An incidence in Gorakhpur where 21 police constables were murdered by revolted mob under the excitement of the anti government move. - *The Tribune*, December, 14, 1921.

²⁵ Gandhi himself has imprisoned and before his departure has given us khadi attire.

Punjab were fascinated by the Gandhian cult of Non- Violence and Satyagraha. They liked the Charkha against the violent movement and cult of bomb. Gandhi launched Salt Satyagraha with his most famous Dandi March on 12th March 1930 at 10:30a.m in which no woman was included. Even than women supported and greeted him everywhere. The tribune recorded that the participation of women grew all the more when their men were arrested. Their wives, daughters and sisters took their places to fill the vacuum.²⁶

Story of Indian freedom struggle is unique and captivating since it at reflects the harmonious blend of the Gandhi's Non-Violent Satyagraha and Charkha of rural women. The whole study is based on one shoot of the Punjabi folklore i.e. Boliyan which reflects that it is wrong to presume that a handful of educated or the elite class women were contributing in the freedom struggle and understood the methods of patriotism. The women in villages were conscious of the political changes in the period and were honestly participating in each and every movement of Gandhi. The women who were not in lead yet showed their solidarity in form of their expression that is Boliyan in Giddha. Gandhi's passive resistance really well matched to their conditioned environment as the Punjabi women were virtually following the tradition of non-violence under the patriarchal set up. He was right when he remarked, 'Woman in our country is brought up to think that she is well only with her husband or on the funeral pyre. I would far rather see India's women trained to wield arms than that they should feel helpless'²⁷ but he never lost any opportunity to raise the estimation of her capabilities and potentials. This really attracted the rural masses in general and women in particular. Women from villages came out in hundreds and thousands to mark their solidarity for the cause. The number of Boliyan is too small to draw whole historical picture of rural women's participation in the Indian National movement but at the same time becomes an important source to generate their history. The rural women under the leadership of Gandhi were vocal enough in depicting their invigorating, adoring, appealing, affectionate sentiments for their national hero at one hand and the feeling of revulsion, antagonism and anguish towards contemporary on the other hand.

²⁶ *The Tribune*, May 31, 1930.

²⁷ *Harijan*, 27 Oct, 1946

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